

# Human Rights in a Time of Climate Change

Joanna Kerr  
Oxfam Canada  
November 9<sup>th</sup>, 2009

## Why is this the human rights issue of our time?

- Almost 250 million people every year are affected by climate-related disasters.
- This could grow to nearly 375 million people a year by 2015.
- An estimated 1 billion people will be forced to leave their homes by 2050.

## Why is this the human rights issue of our time?

- Climate change will place 46 countries at an increased risk of violent **conflict**.
- Several major cities that depend on water from mountain ranges face collapse.
- 75-250 million people across Africa could face more severe water shortages by 2020.
- Whole islands in South Pacific disappearing.

## This is an urgent issue now

- For millions upon millions of poor women and men climate change is already a calamity.

## A shared development, humanitarian, environment & human rights agenda

- On 28 March 2008, the **Human Rights Council** adopted its first resolution on “human rights and climate change”
- “No community with a sense of justice, compassion or respect for basic human rights should accept the current pattern of adaptation.” – **Desmond Tutu**
- “The humanitarian impact of climate change is likely to be among the biggest humanitarian challenges in years and decades to come. Action so far has been slow and inadequate compared with needs.” – **Kofi Annan**

## A “burden” on women

- **Natural disasters kill more females than males.**
- Cyclones in Bangladesh, Hurricane Katrina, European heatwaves – all had significantly higher female mortalities.
- London School of Economics study of 141 disasters: a higher death rate for women and girls is directly linked to their lack of rights.

- **Erratic rainfall, temperatures droughts and floods having multiple dramatic effects:**
  - Deepening the food crisis for women and their families.
  - Increased flooding contributing to outbreaks of diarrhea and cholera.
  - High temperatures making outdoor work increasingly impossible.
  - Search for water and fuelwood making work day longer.
- **Bottom-line: impacts of climate change directly correlated with vulnerability; gender greatest predictor of poverty**

## What's the world doing about it?

- **Two approaches: Mitigation and adaptation.**
- **Mitigation:** Average global temperatures must not rise more than 2 degrees (above pre-industrial levels) if we are to avoid catastrophic and irreversible changes.
- Scientists agree the volume of greenhouse gas emissions must stop rising by **2015** and fall dramatically to somewhere between 25% and 40% below 1990 levels by 2020.

## • **Adaptation:**

- ‘Adaptation’ refers to the wide array of approaches aimed at dealing with the **current** changes in our climate.
- These approaches can include many activities such as new irrigation methods, developing new forms of food preservation, or designing flood resistant homes. By taking adaptive measures, communities become less vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.

## Where is Canada on this?

- On **mitigation**, Canada has pledged to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by to 20% below 2006 levels by 2020. This is equivalent to **3% below 1990** levels. (Scientific consensus indicates a global reduction of 25-40% is needed).
- We also haven’t said how we’ll do it.
- Meanwhile, Canada is among the **top ten emitters** of greenhouse gases both on a per capita and an absolute basis.
- On **adaptation**, Canada has said we will contribute our “fair share” of funding.

## So how do we go about ensuring the rights of all women – of all people – in a time of climate change?

- 4 key areas for response:
  1. A shared human rights and sustainability agenda
  2. Adaptation and risk reduction
  3. Financing
  4. Mitigation strategies

## A shared human rights/sustainability agenda

- We need to shift the discourse from solely about money and technology : those with the least power and control over resources are paying the price and will continue to do so (in other words many of the proposals will just benefit those with access to resources)
- Need to take on reducing inequalities and poverty and advance human rights at the same time

## Adaptation and risk reduction

- **Let women lead:** support women's organizations, and particularly their participation and leadership in climate change action
- Development programmes need to build in climate sensitivity and humanitarian responses need to take on **long-term climate sensitive development**
- Prioritize funding to help poor women adapt to the impacts of climate change – such as clean and accessible water and renewable energy sources, cooking fuels, re-forestation initiatives, and climate change related education;
- Enable **technology transfer that builds capacities** in the global south to develop appropriate technologies, renewable energy solutions and sustainable transportation, with a focus on empowering women to use technology for adaptation and mitigation.

## Financing

- Climate change funds do not meet the needs or reach women because women typically have less access to aid resources and funding opportunities;
- Not only should they be able to use such funds but women should also be included in the decision making process over how the funds are distributed;
- A portion of UNFCCC funds should be allocated to projects addressing women's needs and human rights;
- Many climate change projects should be coordinated by gender experts

## Mitigation strategies

- First of all, if “overpopulation is the problem” then women’s rights and reproductive rights are part of the solution.
- Food security strategies where green house gases can be lowered: improved management of crop land, more efficient irrigation and livestock practices, food-fuel intercropping – but these need to focus on small-scale women farmers (producing most of the world’s food)
- That means: organization capacity and resources systematically dedicated to support rural women’s needs – especially access to land
- Deforestation and reforestation: need for context specific approaches: don’t give women more work to manage the forests and don’t undermine indigenous rights

## What WE need to do

- **Encourage the government to:**
  - Acknowledge the scale of the funding required for climate adaptation and announce an initial commitment before Copenhagen (\$75 billion is needed per year)
  - Ensure financing does not come from the aid budget and instead to include financing adaptation in poor countries as an element of a national cap-and-trade regime
  - Make interim funding for climate adaptation available immediately
- **Radically reduce our own carbon footprint**